

Father speaks about daughter's death during heat-stroke awareness event

By Arelis R. Hernández, Orlando Sentinel arehernandez@tribune.com or 407-420-5471 5:40 p.m. EST, June 13, 2012



Reginald McKinnon stands in a garden of photographs representing children who have died of hyperthermia when locked in hot cars. His 18-month-old daughter died after he forgot her in the back seat. He spoke about the tragedy during a news conference June 13. (George Skene, Orlando Sentinel / Jun 13, 2012) It only happens to uneducated, irresponsible or troubled parents.

That's what Reginald McKinnon thought until he found his baby girl dead in her car seat after a day of work in March 2010. The father of three simply forgot she was there.

Now, the Lee County father knows better and has a message for every parent: It can happen to you too.

"How could I forget my child?" McKinnon asked, as he retold his story Wednesday during a heat-stroke awareness event at the Children's Safety Village of Central Florida, Inc. facility in Orlando. "Unfortunately, it's a question asked all too often."

Florida has the ignominious distinction of ranking second in the nation in the number of children that have died of heat stroke, or hyperthermia, after being left unattended inside vehicles, according to Safe Kids Worldwide, a international child advocacy organization.

At least 58 Florida families have lost their children since 1998. Most were forgotten or became trapped after getting inside an unlocked vehicle. More than 500 have died nationwide in that time.

"The people who have suffered from this are some of the best parents around," said David Strickland, an administrator with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, whose "Where's baby? Look before you lock" campaign encourages parents to create habits that will keep their children safe.

McKinnon had a system. He'd place his work laptop in the back seat so that when he when he left the car, he'd be reminded that his girls were with him.

But on Mar. 8, 2010, McKinnon's routine of taking the girls to day care before work was broken when his 17-month-old

Payton needed a check-up. He went to work early, then left to take the baby to the doctor.

When he went back to work, McKinnon said, his brain went on "auto-pilot."

It wasn't a hot day – 70 or so degrees – but in just 10 minutes the temperature inside a locked car can increase 20 degrees.

In just one hour, the heat inside McKinnon's Ford Explorer likely swelled to 170 degrees – ideal for roasting meat.

Heat stroke sets in once a person has exhausted their fluids and can't regulate their body temperature. Once the body reaches 104 degrees, internal organs begin to fail. At 107, it's all over.

For a child, whose body heats up 3 to 5 times faster than an adult, death is a swift certainty.

During the sweltering summer months, a parent's mental lapse of just a few minutes – brought on by stress or a distraction – could be lethal for their sleeping or strapped-in child.

"These incidents are 100 percent preventable," said Orange County Sheriff Jerry Demings, adding that citizens also have a role in averting tragedy.

Hundreds of children were saved in the last few years by members of the public who called 911 after seeing a child alone inside a car.

In Palm Beach County alone, there were nearly 500 "near-misses" – or instances where emergency responders arrived in the nick of time to save an overheated child.

After months of therapy and soul-searching, McKinnon said he still doesn't know why he forgot about Payton that day, but he promised her he would do anything he could to prevent other parents from sharing his fate.

Prevent vehicular heat stroke deaths

KidsAndCars.org recommends learning the following "BE SAFE" safety tips or taping them to the dashboard.

Back seat – Put something in the back seat so you have to open the door when leaving the vehicle – cell phone, employee badge, handbag, etc.

Every child should be correctly restrained in the back seat.

Stuffed animal – Move it from the car seat to the front seat to remind you when your baby is in the back seat.

Ask your babysitter or child-care provider to call you within 10 minutes if your child hasn't arrived on time.

Focus on driving – Avoid cell phone calls and texting while driving.

Every time you park your vehicle open the back door to make sure no one has been left behind.

KidsAndCars.org also urges security personnel, parking lot attendants and the public to watch for children alone in a vehicle and call 911 if a child is spotted. If the child seems hot or sick, get them out as quickly as possible.

Source: KidsAndCars.org

http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2012-06-13/news/os-reginald-mckinnon-kids-die-hot-cars-20120613_1_hypothermia-hot-cars-health-professionals